Carlton Jama Adams | New York

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Carlton Jama Adams: Active Listening for Healthier Parent-Child Communication

Carlton Jama Adams is a licensed clinical psychologist and psychology professor specializing in healthy parenting. His focus on healthy parenting reflects the importance of building strong family relationships through empathy, communication, and emotional connection. One of the most practical ways parents can strengthen these relationships is by becoming better listeners.

Parent-child communication happens constantly. Parents ask questions, provide instructions, discuss school, establish household rules, solve problems, and respond to their children's emotions. Yet meaningful communication requires more than exchanging words. Children also need to know that their parents are genuinely interested in what they think and feel.

Active listening creates that opportunity. It encourages parents to slow down, pay attention, ask thoughtful questions, and understand a child's perspective before immediately responding. When children experience this type of communication consistently, they can feel more valued, respected, and understood.

The Meaning of Active Listening

Active listening involves intentionally focusing on another person's message instead of simply waiting for an opportunity to respond.

For parents, this means listening to both the words a child uses and the emotions behind those words.

A child who says, "I don't want to go to school," may be expressing much more than a simple preference. There could be a friendship problem, academic pressure, embarrassment, fear, or another concern behind the statement.

An immediate response such as "You have to go to school, so stop complaining" may end the conversation before the parent understands what is happening.

An active listener might instead say, "Something seems to be bothering you. Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

That response creates space for communication.

Why Children Need to Feel Understood

Children develop their understanding of relationships partly through their experiences with their parents and caregivers. When parents regularly listen and respond with empathy, they communicate that children's experiences are worthy of attention.

Being understood does not mean children always receive the answer they want.

A parent can say:

"I understand that you're disappointed."

"I can see why you're frustrated."

"I understand why you wanted to do that."

These statements acknowledge feelings without necessarily approving a particular behavior or changing a decision.

This distinction can help parents maintain authority while also creating emotional connection.

Empathy Makes Listening More Effective

Empathy allows parents to consider situations from their children's perspectives.

Adults have more experience and may recognize that many childhood disappointments are temporary. Children may not yet have that perspective.

A disagreement with a friend can feel overwhelming. A poor grade can feel like a major failure. Being excluded from an activity can feel deeply personal.

When parents respond by minimizing these experiences, children may become less willing to share.

An empathetic response does not exaggerate the problem. It simply recognizes the child's emotional experience.

Parents can say, "That sounds really difficult," before asking what happened.

That simple pause can make a conversation feel safer and more supportive.

Listening Before Giving Advice

Parents naturally want to solve problems for their children.

However, advice can be more effective when it comes after understanding the situation.

If a child complains about a difficult assignment, the parent might immediately suggest a study strategy. But the real problem could be confusion about the instructions, conflict with a group member, fear of failure, or feeling overwhelmed.

Listening first helps parents identify the actual concern.

A useful sequence is:

1. Listen.
2. Ask questions.
3. Reflect what the child said.
4. Acknowledge emotions.
5. Discuss possible solutions.

This approach helps children feel that their perspective is part of the conversation.

The Role of Nonverbal Communication

Listening is communicated through more than words.

Children notice whether parents appear distracted, rushed, irritated, or interested.

When possible, parents can put down a phone, pause another activity, turn toward the child, and give the conversation appropriate attention.

Other useful behaviors include:

- Appropriate eye contact
- An attentive posture
- Calm facial expressions
- A patient tone
- Avoiding unnecessary interruptions
- Nodding or offering brief acknowledgments

These behaviors communicate presence.

Parents cannot always stop everything they are doing whenever a child wants to talk. However, they can recognize important moments and make an intentional effort to be available.

Questions That Encourage Children to Talk

Questions can either encourage communication or shut it down.

Instead of asking a child, "Did you have a good day?" parents might ask, "What was the best part of your day?"

Instead of "Why are you acting like that?" parents can ask, "What happened?"

Instead of immediately asking, "What are you going to do about it?" parents might begin with, "How are you feeling about what happened?"

Open-ended questions allow children to explain themselves in their own words.

Parents should also avoid turning every conversation into an interrogation. Genuine curiosity works best when children feel that the parent is interested rather than searching for mistakes.

Active Listening During Conflict

Disagreements are a normal part of family life.

Parents and children may disagree about homework, technology, household responsibilities, friendships, social activities, and independence.

During conflict, emotions can make communication difficult. Both parent and child may focus on defending their positions.

Active listening can help create a pause.

A parent might say:

"I want to understand your point of view."

"Let's slow down and talk about what happened."

"Tell me what you're feeling."

These statements do not remove the need for boundaries. They simply create a path toward understanding before the parent makes a final response.

Listening Does Not Mean Removing Boundaries

Empathetic parenting is sometimes misunderstood as allowing children to do whatever they want.

Active listening does not eliminate parental responsibility.

Parents still need to establish reasonable rules, expectations, and consequences.

The difference is that parents can acknowledge feelings while maintaining appropriate boundaries.

For example:

"I understand that you are angry about the rule. The rule is still important."

This response tells the child that emotions are acceptable while certain behaviors may not be.

Children can learn that frustration does not automatically change a decision and that disagreement can happen without disrespect.

Understanding What Behavior May Communicate

Children do not always have the vocabulary to explain complex emotions.

Behavior may sometimes provide clues about what a child is experiencing.

A normally talkative child who becomes quiet may be dealing with sadness or disappointment.

A child who becomes unusually irritable may feel overwhelmed.

A teenager who repeatedly challenges rules may be seeking greater independence.

Parents should not automatically assume the reason behind behavior. Instead, they can use listening to explore what is happening.

The question becomes more than, "How do I stop this?"

It becomes, "What is happening underneath this behavior?"

That shift can help parents respond more thoughtfully.

Everyday Listening Builds Connection

Active listening does not need to occur only during serious conversations.

Parents can create opportunities for communication during ordinary activities.

Mealtimes, car rides, walks, errands, cooking, and bedtime routines can all provide moments for conversation.

Parents can ask about:

- School experiences
- Friendships
- Interests
- Goals
- Challenges
- Accomplishments
- Feelings
- Future plans

The goal is not to force conversation. It is to make communication a normal part of family life.

When children regularly experience small moments of attention, they may feel more comfortable initiating important conversations later.

Listening Across Different Developmental Stages

Children's communication needs change as they grow.

Young children may need parents to help identify and name emotions. Listening can include repeating a child's words and helping them understand what they are feeling.

School-age children often want to discuss friendships, activities, school, and interests. Parents can show curiosity without turning every conversation into a lesson.

Teenagers may want more privacy and independence. Parents can respect that growing autonomy while continuing to make themselves available for meaningful conversations.

The communication strategy can change, but the central message remains consistent:

Your voice matters to me.

Modeling Healthy Communication

Children learn by watching their parents.

Parents who listen respectfully demonstrate how healthy communication works.

They can model phrases such as:

"Tell me more."

"I want to understand."

"Let me make sure I heard you correctly."

"I understand why you feel that way."

"I don't agree with the choice, but I understand what you were thinking."

These statements can become part of a family's communication habits.

Children can learn that listening does not require agreement and that respectful disagreement is possible.

Repairing Communication When Things Go Wrong

No parent listens perfectly.

There will be times when parents are tired, distracted, impatient, or frustrated.

What happens after a communication mistake can be just as important as the mistake itself.

A parent can return to the child and say:

"I didn't listen carefully earlier. I'm sorry. Can you tell me again?"

This teaches children that relationships can be repaired.

It also demonstrates accountability. Parents show that healthy communication includes recognizing mistakes and making an effort to reconnect.

The Long-Term Impact of Feeling Heard

Children cannot be protected from every challenge.

They will experience disappointment, conflict, mistakes, uncertainty, and difficult emotions.

Parents may not always be able to solve those problems.

However, parents can provide a relationship in which children know they have someone willing to listen.

That relationship can become an important source of support as children grow.

Children who experience respectful communication may become more comfortable asking for help, discussing difficult situations, acknowledging mistakes, and expressing emotions.

The goal is not to eliminate every problem. It is to strengthen the relationship through which families navigate problems together.

Creating a Listening-Centered Family

A family culture of listening develops through consistent actions.

Parents can begin with simple habits:

- Give important conversations appropriate attention.
- Allow children to finish speaking.
- Ask questions before making assumptions.
- Avoid minimizing emotions.
- Listen before offering solutions.
- Maintain reasonable boundaries.
- Respect age-appropriate independence.
- Make time for everyday conversations.
- Model empathy.
- Repair communication when necessary.

These practices do not require perfection.

They require intention.

Conclusion

Active listening is one of the most accessible ways parents can strengthen communication with their children. By giving children genuine attention, asking thoughtful questions, acknowledging emotions, and responding with empathy, parents can create relationships where children feel heard and valued.

Carlton Jama Adams brings attention to the importance of healthy parenting and meaningful family relationships. Active listening provides parents with a practical way to put those principles into action.

A child does not always need a parent to have the perfect answer. Sometimes the most meaningful response is simply to listen.

When parents make space for their children's voices, they create opportunities for trust, understanding, and connection. Over time, these moments can help establish a family environment where communication is not something children fear or avoid, but something they can rely on.

Carlton Jama Adams is a licensed clinical psychologist and psychology professor specializing in healthy parenting. His work explores the importance of healthy family relationships, empathetic communication, and practical approaches to strengthening connections between parents and children. To discover more perspectives and articles on healthy parenting, communication, and child development, visit his **Vocal Media author profile**.